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TO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0103  
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0498  
INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0016  
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0014  
RUEHKUK/REO KIRKUK 0014  
RUEHBC/REO BASRAH 0518

UNCLAS BASRAH 000006

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [IZ](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [EAID](#) [ENRG](#)

SUBJECT: REO BASRAH CHALLENGES LOCAL MEDIA

REF: BASRAH 002

¶1. Summary. The Regional Embassy Office (REO) in Basrah hosted a luncheon on January 3 for four journalists from Basrah and Maysan provinces. The journalists focused on the security situation and expressed a desire to maintain frequent contact. The REO director stated that he wants to build a long-term relationship with the local media that goes beyond discussing problems and focuses on solutions. He challenged the journalists to play a role in developing civil society. Plans are under way to organize press briefings on U.S. Army Corps of Engineer and British-led Multinational Force Division - Southeast (MND-SE) operations. End Summary.

¶2. On January 3, 2007, REO Basrah invited three journalists from Basrah and one from Maysan province to a luncheon in the first step of our new public outreach program. The journalists -- Majed al-Braikan of Radio Sawa; Abbas al-Fayad of Iraqiya TV; Nathem Jawad of al-Basrah, the provincial council newspaper; and Nazar Abdul Wahed of al-Sabah newspaper and other publications in Maysan province -- engaged in an animated and frank discussion with the director, deputy, and public diplomacy officer (PDO). A British military press officer also participated in part of the conversation.

¶3. The candid, off-the-record discussion focused on security and economic issues besetting Basrah and Maysan. Jawad criticized the recent disbanding of the Serious Crimes Unit (SCU) and the demolition of the SCU headquarters building by British forces. (Note: The SCU was infested by JAM and other militia members who carried out assassinations, kidnappings and extortion. Following the raid, Jawad's employer, the Basrah Provincial Council disengaged from MND-SE in protest against the attack. In contrast, the people of Basrah expressed support for the raid. End note.) (See reftel.) Al-Braikan and al-Fayad defended the operation, saying it freed scores of detainees who had been tortured and probably would have been killed by the SCU. The journalists complained that the lack of security was impeding economic growth and fueling the militias. They also complained about electricity shortages, receiving at times, only four hours a day. They asked what is the Coalition going to do about these problems.

¶4. The director stated that he is interested in developing a long-term relationship with the media that would not focus on the problems but instead on solutions. He dispelled the myth that the Coalition alone is capable of solving all the problems in southern Iraq. He said the U.S. government has sent representatives to Basrah to help the people, but instead we are subjected to daily mortar and rocket attacks. He talked about the role of the media in democratic societies and challenged them to speak out against militia violence and corrupt police, acknowledging the risks they face. For our next meeting, he asked the journalists to devise solutions, and said we would

discuss our respective roles in this process.

¶5. The journalists expressed a need to maintain regular contact with the REO and with British forces. They noted the public is out of touch with the efforts of the Coalition. The director expressed his intention to hold regular roundtable discussions and press conferences to convey information about Coalition efforts in southern Iraq. The PDO pointed out that the United States has spent huge sums on electricity and other infrastructure projects, some of which are sabotaged by the militants. The PDO offered to arrange press conferences with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and British military officials on Coalition reconstruction projects. The PDO also raised the prospect of training programs for regional journalists. Both offers were welcomed.

¶6. Comment. The current security environment has made it difficult for us to maintain outside contacts. Nonetheless, we plan on pressing ahead with a vigorous outreach program, and the media luncheon was the first successful step. The guests said they were delighted by the effort to renew regular contact with U.S. officials. Jawad requested an interview with the director, which the director agreed to schedule in late January. In a similar vein, the PDO has scheduled a joint press conference by British and Iraqi brigade commanders on Operation Sinbad, a joint UK-Iraqi reconstruction operation funded by U.S. dollars. End Comment.

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